

Bactrian language

Bactrian (Bactrian: 𐎲𐎠𐎼𐎿, romanized: *ariāo*, [arjaː], meaning "Iranian")^[3] is an extinct [Eastern Iranian language](#) formerly spoken in the [Central Asian](#) region of [Bactria](#) (present-day Afghanistan)^[4] and used as the official language of the [Kushan](#) and the [Hephthalite](#) empires.

Name

It was long thought that [Avestan](#) represented "Old Bactrian", but this notion had "rightly fallen into discredit by the end of the 19th century".^[5]

Bactrian, which was written predominantly in an alphabet based on the [Greek script](#), was known natively as 𐎲𐎠𐎼𐎿 [arjaː] ("[Arya](#)"; an [endonym](#) common amongst Indo-Iranian peoples). It has also been known by names such as Greco-Bactrian or Kushan or Kushano-Bactrian.

Under Kushan rule, Bactria became known as *Tukhara* or *Tokhara*, and later as [Tokharistan](#). When texts in two extinct and [previously unknown Indo-European languages](#) were discovered in the [Tarim Basin](#) of China, during the early 20th century, they were linked circumstantially to Tokharistan, and Bactrian was sometimes referred to as "Eteo-Tocharian" (i.e. "true" or "original" Tocharian). By the 1970s, however, it became clear that there was little evidence for such a connection. For instance, the Tarim "Tocharian" languages were "[centum](#)" languages within the Indo-European family, whereas Bactrian was an Iranian, thus "[satem](#)" language.

Classification

Bactrian is a part of the [Eastern Iranian languages](#) and shares features with the extinct Middle Iranian languages [Sogdian](#) and [Khwarezmian](#) (Eastern) and [Parthian](#) (Western), as well as sharing affinity with the modern Eastern Iranian languages such as [Pamir](#) subgroup of languages like [Munji](#) and [Yidgha](#) which are part of the same branch of the Pamir languages.^[6] Its genealogical position is unclear.^[7] According to another source, the present-day speakers of Munji, the modern Eastern Iranian language of the Munjan Valley in the [Kuran wa Munjan district](#) of the [Badakhshan province](#) in northeast [Afghanistan](#), display the closest possible linguistic affinity with the Bactrian language.^[8]

History



The [Rabatak inscription](#) is an inscription written on a rock in the Bactrian language and the Greek script, which was found in 1993 at the site of [Rabatak](#), near [Surkh Kotal](#) in [Afghanistan](#). The inscription relates to the rule of the [Kushan](#) emperor [Kanishka](#), and gives remarkable clues on the genealogy of the Kushan dynasty.

Bactrian became the [lingua franca](#) of the Kushan Empire and the region of Bactria, replacing the Greek language. Bactrian was used by successive rulers in Bactria, until the arrival of the [Umayyad Caliphate](#).

Historical development

Following the conquest of Bactria by [Alexander the Great](#) in 323 BC, for about two centuries [Greek](#) was the administrative language of his [Hellenistic](#) successors, that is, the [Seleucid](#) and the [Greco-Bactrian kingdoms](#). Eastern [Scythian](#) tribes (the [Saka](#), or Sacaraucae of Greek sources) invaded the territory around 140 BC, and at some time after 124 BC, Bactria was overrun by a confederation of tribes belonging to the [Great Yuezhi](#) and [Tokhari](#). In the 1st century AD, the Kushana, one of the Yuezhi tribes, founded the ruling dynasty of the [Kushan Empire](#).

The Kushan Empire initially retained the [Greek language](#) for administrative purposes but soon

Bactrian	
Αριαο	
Αα Ββ Δδ Εε Αο ΒϜ Δο Ζε Ηη Φφ Γγ Ιι κκ φφ ς ς ΙϚ Κκ Λλ Μμ Νν κκ Ηη μμ ςς Οο Ωω Ππ Ρρ οο ωω ς ς ρρ Σς ττ Θθ Υυ ςς ςς θθ ςς Χχ Ζζ Ββ χχ ςς ββ The Bactrian alphabet (block and cursive letters, here in black). The Bactrian script was directly adapted from the Greek script (here in grey), with the addition of the letter <i>sho</i> (𐎱).^[1]	
Pronunciation	[arja:]
Native to	Bactria
Region	Central Asia
Era	300 BC – 1000 AD ^[2]
Language family	Indo-European - Indo-Iranian - Iranian - Eastern Iranian Bactrian
Writing system	Greek script Manichaean script
Official status	
Official language in	Kushan Empire Hephthalite Empire

began to use Bactrian. The Bactrian [Rabatak inscription](#) (discovered in 1993 and deciphered in 2000) records that the Kushan king [Kanishka](#) (c. 127 AD)^[9] discarded Greek ("Ionian") as the language of administration and adopted Bactrian ("Arya language"). The Greek language accordingly vanished from official use and only Bactrian was later attested. The [Greek script](#), however, remained and was used to write Bactrian. The territorial expansion of the Kushans helped propagate Bactrian in other parts of [Central Asia](#) and [North India](#).

Language codes	
ISO 639-3	xbc
Linguist List	xbc (https://web.archive.org/web/20200101010101/http://multitree.org/codes/xbc)
Glottolog	bact1239 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/id/bact1239)

In the 3rd century, the Kushan territories west of the [Indus River](#) fell to the [Sasanians](#), and Bactrian began to be influenced by [Middle Persian](#). The eastern extent of the Kushan Empire in Northwestern India, was conquered by the [Gupta Empire](#). Besides the [Pahlavi script](#) and the [Brahmi script](#), some coinage of this period is still in the Aryo (Bactrian) script.

From the mid-4th century, Bactria and northwestern India gradually fell under the control the [Hephthalite](#) and other [Huna tribes](#). The Hephthalite period is marked by linguistic diversity; in addition to Bactrian, Middle Persian, [Indo-Aryan](#) and [Latin](#) vocabulary is also attested. The Hephthalites ruled these regions until the 7th century, when they were overrun by the [Umayyad Caliphate](#), after which official use of Bactrian ceased. Although Bactrian briefly survived in other usage, that also eventually ceased, and the latest known examples of the Bactrian script, found in the [Tochi Valley](#) in Pakistan, date to the end of the 9th century.^[10]

Writing system



Bactrian was predominantly written using the [Greek script](#) with the addition of the letter *sho* (here in majuscule and minuscule) to represent the /ʃ/ sound.

Among Indo-Iranian languages, the use of the Greek script is unique to Bactrian. Although ambiguities remain, some of the disadvantages were overcome by using *heta* (𐎧, 𐎡) for /h/ and by

introducing *sho* (ϐ, ϑ) to represent /ʃ/.^[11] *Xi* (Ξ, ξ) and *psi* (Ψ, ψ) were not used for writing Bactrian as the *ks* and *ps* sequences did not occur in Bactrian. They were, however, probably used to represent numbers (just as other Greek letters were).

Records



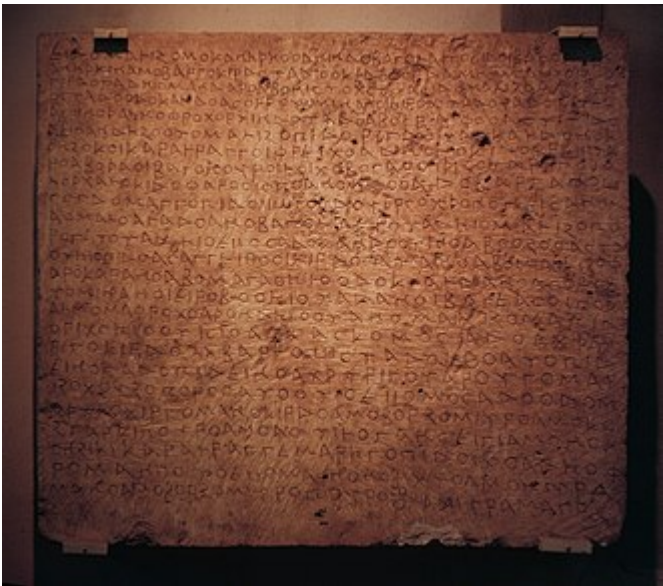
The word "*Alchono*" (αλχοννο) in cursive Bactrian script, on a coin of the *Alchon Huns* ruler *Khingila*, 5th century AD.^{[12][13][14]}

The Bactrian language is known from inscriptions, coins, seals, manuscripts, and other documents.

Sites at which Bactrian language inscriptions have been found are (in north–south order) *Afrasiyab* in *Uzbekistan*; *Kara-Tepe*, *Airtam*, *Delbarjin*, *Balkh*, *Kunduz*, *Baglan*, *Ratabak/Surkh Kotal*, *Oruzgan*, *Kabul*, *Dasht-e Navur*, *Ghazni*, *Jagatu* in *Afghanistan*; and *Islamabad*, *Shatial Bridge* and *Tochi Valley* in *Pakistan*.^[15] Of eight known manuscript fragments in Greco-Bactrian script, one is from *Lou-lan* and seven from *Toyoq*, where they were discovered by the second and third *Turpan* expeditions under *Albert von Le Coq*. One of these may be a *Buddhist* text. One other manuscript, in *Manichaean script*, was found at *Qočo* by *Mary Boyce* in 1958.

Over 150 legal documents, accounts, letters and Buddhist texts have surfaced since the 1990s,^[16] the largest collection of which is the *Khalili Collection of Aramaic Documents*.^[17] These have greatly increased the detail in which Bactrian is currently known.^[16]

Phonology



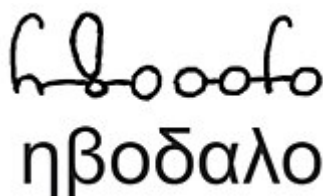
The [Surkh Kotal](#) inscription (SK4) is the first known substantial document written in Bactrian, an Iranian language. It uses the [Greek script](#). It was written at the time of the [Kushan](#) ruler [Huvishka](#), 2nd century CE. [Kabul Museum](#).^[18]

The phonology of Bactrian is not known with certainty, owing to the limitations of the native scripts, and also its status as an extinct language.

Consonants

Consonants of Bactrian

Type		Labial	Dental or alveolar	Palatal or postalveolar	Velar		Glottal
					plain	labialized	
Stops	Voiceless	p	t		k		
	Voiced	b(?)	d		g		
Affricates	Voiceless		ts̰				
	Voiced		dʒ̰				
Fricatives	Voiceless	f	θ(?); s	ʃ	x	xʷ	h
	Voiced	v	ð(?); z	ʒ(?)	ɣ		
Nasals		m	n				
Approximants			l	j		w	
Rhotic			r				



The Hephthalites used the [Bactrian script](#) (top). Here, their [endonym](#) *Ebodalo* (ἡβοδαλο), "[Hephthalites](#)".

A major difficulty in determining Bactrian phonology is that affricates and voiced stops were not consistently distinguished from the corresponding fricatives in the Greek script.

- [Proto-Iranian](#) *b, *d, *g have generally become spirants, as in most other Eastern Iranian languages. A distinctive feature of Bactrian, shared within the Iranian languages with Munji, Yidgha and Pashto, is the development of Proto-Iranian *d > *ð further to /l/, which may have been areal in nature.^[7] Original *d remains only in a few consonant clusters, e.g. *bandaka > βανδαγο 'servant', *dugdā > λογδο 'daughter'. The clusters /lr/ and /rl/ appear in earlier Bactrian, but revert to /dr/, /rd/ later, e.g. *drauga > λρωγο (4th to 5th century) > δδρωπο (7th to 8th century) 'lie, falsehood'.^[19]
- Proto-Iranian *p, *t, *č, *k have become voiced between vowels, and after a nasal consonant or *r.
 - Inside a word, the digraphs ββ, δδ for original voiceless *p, *t can be found, which probably represent [b], [d]. The former is attested only in a single word, αββο 'water'. Manichaean Bactrian appears to only have had /v/ in native vocabulary. According to Gholami, instances of single δ may indicate a fricative pronunciation, [ð].^[20]
 - γ appears to stand for both the stop [g] and the fricative [ɣ], but it is unclear if a contrast existed, and which instances are which. Evidence from the Manichaean script suggests that γ from *k may have been /g/ and γ from *g may have been /ɣ/. According to Greek orthographic practices, γγ represents [ŋg].^[21]
- σ may continue both Proto-Iranian *c > *s and *č, and the Manichaean script confirms that it represents two phonemes, likely /s/ and /ts/.^[22]
- ζ may continue similarly on one hand Proto-Iranian *dz > *z, and on the other *ǰ and *č, and it represents at least /z/ and /dz/. This distinction is again confirmed by the Manichaean script. Also a third counterpart of ζ is found in Manichaean Bactrian, possibly representing /ʒ/.

The status of θ is unclear; it only appears in the word ιθαο 'thus, also', which may be a loanword from another Iranian language. In most positions Proto-Iranian *θ becomes /h/ (written υ), or is lost, e.g. *puθra- > πουρο 'son'.^[23] The cluster *θw, however, appears to become /lf/, e.g. *wikāθwan > οιγαλφο 'witness'.^[24]

ḡ continues, in addition to Proto-Iranian *š, also Proto-Iranian *s in the clusters *sr, *str, *rst. In several cases, however, Proto-Iranian *š becomes /h/ or is lost; the distribution is unclear. E.g. *snušā > ασνωυο 'daughter-in-law', *aštā > αταο 'eight', *xšāθriya > χαρο 'ruler', *pašman- > παμανο 'wool'.

Vowels

Vowels of Bactrian

Type	Short			Type	Long	
	Front	Central	Back		Front	Back
Close	i		u	Close	i:	u:
Mid	e	ə	o?	Mid	e:	o:
Open	a			Open	a:	



Silver drachm of [Alchon Huns](#) ruler [Khingila](#). Bactrian script legend: χιγγιλο αλchonνο "*Khiggilo Alchono*", with Alchon [tamgha](#) symbol 𐭪𐭫.^[25]

The Greek script does not consistently represent vowel length. Fewer vowel contrasts yet are found in the Manichaean script, but short /a/ and long /a:/ are distinguished in it, suggesting that Bactrian generally retains the Proto-Iranian vowel length contrast.

It is not clear if *o* might represent short [o] in addition to [u], and if any contrast existed. Short [o] may have occurred at least as a reflex of *a followed by a lost *u in the next syllable, e.g. *madu > μολο 'wine', *pasu > ποσο 'sheep'. Short [e] is also rare. By contrast, long /e:/, /o:/ are well established as reflexes of Proto-Iranian diphthongs and certain vowel-semivowel sequences: *η* < *ai, *aya, *iya; *ω* < *au, *awa.

An epenthetic vowel [ə] (written α) is inserted before word-initial [consonant clusters](#).

Original word-final vowels and word-initial vowels in open syllables were generally lost. A word-final *o* is normally written, but this was probably silent, and it is appended even after retained word-final vowels: e.g. **aštā* > *αταο* 'eight', likely pronounced /ata:/.

The Proto-Iranian syllabic rhotic **ṛ* is lost in Bactrian, and is reflected as *op* adjacent to labial consonants, *ip* elsewhere; this agrees with the development in the western Iranian languages [Parthian](#) and [Middle Persian](#).

Orthography



Variations of the [Greek alphabet](#) (narrow columns) in the [Kushan script](#) (wide columns).

Letter correspondence

Greek Letter	IPA	Greek Letter	IPA	Greek Letter	IPA
α	a, a:	η	e:	ρ	r
α/o	ə	θ	θ	σ	s, ts
β	v	ι	i, j	τ	t
β/ββ	b	κ	k	υ	h
γ	ɣ, g	λ	l	φ	f
δ	ð	μ	m	χ	x
δ/δδ	d	ν	n	χο	xʷ
ε	e	ο	o, u, w	ω	o:
ζ	z, ʒ, dz	π	p	ϕ	ʃ

Examples



Surkh Kotal

inscription in Bactrian,
National Museum of
Afghanistan

See also

- [Kidarites](#)

Notes

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12.  **Khingila** with the word "*Alchono*" in the **Bactrian script** (αλχονο) and the **Tamgha** symbol on his coins **CNG Coins** (<https://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=114833>) .
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20. **Gholami 2010**, p. 10.
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24. **Gholami 2010**, p. 25.

25. This coin is in the collection of the [British Museum](#). For equivalent coin, see [CNG Coins](#) (<http://www.cngcoins.com/Coin.aspx?CoinID=156854>)

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